ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A19

NEW YORK TIMES
26 May 1986

ESSAY
William Safire

They Were Expendable

WASHINGTON

"Can we renounce the good and worthy ideals for which these Nicaraguan patriots shed their blood," rhetorically asked Ronald Reagan last week as he urged support for the contras, "and believe the freedom lost there may not one day be lost here as well? Some say yes. I say never."

Bombast. If the President believes his Administration is united behind him in setting and espousing a clear policy to stop Communism in Nicaragua, he is living in a dream world.

We are coming to the moment of truth in Central America. Up to now, only the trouble the contras have been causing in Nicaragua's backyard has stopped Communist expansion. But in a couple of weeks, the Contadora compromisers are scheduled to offer Nicaragua a treaty that will call on the U.S. to end all military pressure on the Communists — in return for the easy reiteration of a set of promises the revolutionaries in Managua have broken before.

The Soviet-supported Communists would be crazy not to sign: the cutoff of aid to the pesky resistance is real, while honest elections with press freedom and an end to subverting neighbors are promises that fall trippingly from the tongue.

At that moment, Mr. Reagan would need to commit all his resources of popularity, and marshal all his dwindling support in the Congress, to strengthen the anti-Communist contras. Is he getting ready to do that?

Consider: last week, the pro-contra side of the Reagan Administration, led by the Pentagon's Fred Iklé and supported by the C.I.A.'s William Casey, issued a report casting doubt on the likelihood of the Managua dictatorship's suddenly going into the promise-keeping business, and predicting that the withdrawal of support to the contras now would result in the need to commit 100,000 U.S. troops in years to come.

But the anti-contra wing of the same Administration is led by career superdiplomat Philip Habib. In a schism that exceeds the worst Brzezinski-Vance dissension in the Carter Administration, Mr. Habib's State Department announced that the Pentagon study, issued to Congress and the public under a Department of Defense seal, "has no standing as a United States Government document."

What caused this war between State and Defense? The root reason is a dispute, allowed to fester by the increasingly remote President, over whether our sponsorship of continuous military pressure is needed to stop and reverse Communist expansion in our sphere of influence.

The immediate cause was the written statement by Mr. Habib that "on signature" of a pact, U.S. aid to Nicaragua's rebels would cease. That caused alarm and dismay among hardline Congressmen, led by Representative Jack Kemp, who have been fighting in the House for what they thought was the President's policy; they remember the Nixon-Kissinger sellout of the foolishly trusting Kurds in Iraq, and do not want this allied force to be treated as expendable in an amoral power game.

The White House tried to build a paper bridge over the chasm, praising our State Department envoy while having a disembodied voice off stage call the formulation of Ambassador Habib "imprecise." We will delay our abandonment of the contras, according to the senior official afraid to affix his name to the statement, until the treaty is "implemented."

That weaseling is supposed to reassure the hawks. It does not. Mr. Reagan's ringing rhetoric no longer obscures his interminable waffling on contra policy. Because he is unwilling to try to win, he will lose: by muddying the waters with his indecision, the President has already undermined his chances of winning support for the contras in the House. Nothing is less inspiring than a seemingly certain trumpet playing an uncertain tune.

This all means that on using the contras as bargaining chips, George Shultz and George Bush have won, and Caspar Weinberger and William Casey have lost. And not for the first time: though alliances shift on summitry, responses to terrorism and on trade policy, Mr. Shultz rarely loses and Mr. Weinberger rarely wins.

Perhaps that explains why Mr. Reagan encourages the Pentagon and the C.I.A. to charge about claiming that leaks are doing them in, to play with polygraphs to intimidate whistle-blowers, and to harass the press with threats of prosecution. Having lost on the central internal battles, the Weinberger-Casey set is left to put up the pretense of policy power with a display of angry repression.

Will Mr. Reagan see this split as the start of the disintegration of his leadership, knock heads within his official family to reassert long-term support of the human beings he likes to call freedom fighters, and in so doing, invigorate the remainder of his term? Some say yes. I say never. □